Provisional

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**Economic and Social Council**
**Substantive session of 2013**
Humanitarian segment

**Provisional summary record of the 35th meeting**
Held at the Palais des Nations, Geneva, on Wednesday, 17 July 2013, at 10 a.m.

*President*: Mr. Khan (Vice-President) ..... (Pakistan)

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Special economic, humanitarian and disaster relief assistance (*continued*)

*Panel discussion: Promoting humanitarian innovation for improved response*

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*In the absence of Mr. Osorio (Colombia), Mr. Khan (Pakistan), Vice-President, took the Chair.*

*The meeting was called to order at 10.10 a.m.*

**Special economic, humanitarian and disaster relief assistance** (*continued*) (E/2013/77-A/68/84 and E/2013/L.20)

*Panel discussion: Promoting humanitarian innovation for improved response*

**The President** said that technology was changing the nature of responses to humanitarian crises. During the 2010 floods in Pakistan, mobile phone technology had been used to help distribute emergency funds, thereby enabling 2.5 million families to meet their basic needs at the height of the catastrophe. International aid agencies must embrace innovation, learn from best practices at the regional and country levels and do more to involve affected communities.

*He wished to invite the Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator to act as moderator.*

**Ms. Amos** (Moderator) said that the number of situations requiring an international humanitarian response had doubled since 2000. At the same time, the digital divide was closing. Technology was being used to enable affected communities to articulate their needs more clearly and to seek resources. Innovation meant adopting not only technology but also new approaches to aid delivery. The emergence of the Digital Humanitarian Network and such initiatives as Souktel, which conducted fast, SMS-based polling and provided aid agencies with up-to-the-minute information, demonstrated the power of new technologies. Humanitarian aid agencies needed to embrace such changes.

Participants in the meeting were invited to take part in a poll via text message to share their views on the question: "Innovation in humanitarian action is most useful to …". The results would be available at the end of the meeting.

**Ms. Harman** (Director of Information Management and Situational Awareness, American Red Cross) said that the American Red Cross was becoming a facilitator of communications between people with needs and people with resources. Social media were at the heart of the digital operations centre that the organization had launched in Washington D.C. in 2012. Through social media platforms, the centre offered access to real-time assessments of crises and instant routing of messages to and from affected areas. More importantly, it made it possible to mobilize greater numbers of volunteer workers than had been hitherto possible. Through Twitter and similar platforms, it was possible to receive information from and tweet advice to people in areas that had, for example, been hit by tornados. Similarly, the system could be used to put people in disaster-struck areas in contact with one another. The digital operations centre was able to send situation reports to government bodies in real time. The language used in tweets was varied and colourful, but useful information on a disaster situation could frequently be extracted from them.

The centre had proved its effectiveness as an integral component of the disaster relief work of the American Red Cross when Hurricane Sandy had struck the United States in October 2012. It would continue to focus on real-time data collection and reporting, but could equally be used to train disaster workers versed in the use of social media and to manage and train volunteers. It was hoped that the work of the centre would be fully integrated with that of other disaster services through standard data-sharing processes and that the centre would be able to work more closely and effectively with grass-roots groups that used social media within their communities.

**Ms. Rasmusson** (Assistant Executive Director of the World Food Programme (WFP)) said that WFP had launched several innovative projects in the context of its

strategic shift from delivering food aid to providing food assistance. Its system of cash and voucher transfers had been introduced into projects in 49 countries, and a comprehensive software platform, SCOpe (System for Cash Operations) was being piloted. A smart card-based electronic voucher system using fingerprint verification and a mobile phone-based voucher system would soon be built into SCOpe.

WFP had embarked on a thorough review of its internal working methods and had found cost-effective solutions to several problems. Under a new system of advance financing facilities — essentially internal loans — it had become possible to allocate funds to projects even before donors' pledges had arrived. The introduction of a vehicle leasing programme had led to savings of more than US$ 3.5 million a year. The United Nations Humanitarian Response Depot network had five strategically placed warehouses around the world and used its scale and buying power to negotiate competitive prices with suppliers. The network was able to ship relief items to emergency locations anywhere in the world quickly and in a cost-efficient manner.

**Mr. Osman** (Managing Director of Star FM, Kenya), accompanying his statement with a digital slide presentation, said that communication itself constituted a form of aid. The Star FM radio station had been established in Dadaab refugee camp in northern Kenya in 2006 to serve the refugee community. Operating round the clock, it produced a range of programmes, many of which focused on refugee and humanitarian issues. It broadcast in Somali and provided critical information to refugee communities. Broadcasts could be picked up via standard and solar-powered radios, Internet streaming and dedicated telephone landlines. The Souktel organization would be installing a system in Dadaab that would enable listeners to send text messages to the radio station for free. Two-way communication was one of the keys to Star FM's success. The station worked with aid agencies to trace missing persons, provided news from the agencies, and broadcast emergency information. Star FM had been advised to create a sister, non-profit organization through which it would be able to work more freely with international aid agencies. Insecurity was a growing problem in Dadaab refugee camp. The lack of electricity and poor mobile telephone coverage hampered the radio station's work.

Star FM broadcast the daily *Gargaar* ("Assistance") programme, a one-hour programme devoted to discussing humanitarian and refugee issues. A large share of the content was produced directly in the Dadaab refugee camp. The topics covered by the programme included the responsibilities of each agency in the various camps, return and repatriation procedures, the polio outbreak and vaccination process and the use of biometrics in food distribution.

A large-scale survey conducted to measure access to information in the country's refugee camps had found that some 53 per cent of respondents did not have enough information to make decisions, while over 74 per cent relied on radio broadcasts as their main source of information. The survey had also found that the ability of refugees to interact with aid providers was dependent on how long the refugees had been at the camp. The results had been presented to humanitarian actors and a report would be published outlining strategies to improve dialogue with local communities. Regular meetings, feedback sessions and focus groups were held across six camps to assess the impact of *Gargaar* and ensure that its content was relevant to the target audience. Listeners reported being better informed regarding services, while humanitarian actors noted a marked improvement in their interaction with camp inhabitants. Radio programmes also played an important part in ensuring that agencies were held accountable for their work.

He urged all humanitarian agencies to coordinate with local media to make information available to aid recipients and to build stronger relationships with the private sector. He called for the distribution of solar-powered radio sets and mobile phones so that

more refugees could receive the information that they needed without having to worry about access to electricity.

Speaking by video link from the studios of Star FM radio in Kenya, reporters **Ms. Sanbur**, **Mr. Sheik Mohamed** and **Mr. Sheik** discussed the impact of Star FM radio on life in Dadaab refugee camp. Prior to the launch of the station, they said that information about which agencies were operating in the camp or what services were available to refugees had been almost non-existent. Communication infrastructure had been so poor that even the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees had had to mount a loudspeaker on a truck to address the inhabitants of the camp. Thanks to *Gargaar*, refugees now knew where to go for drinking water, health care and education services. They could also voice their needs and concerns. For example, the programme had aired a report on child labour in which interviews with children, parents, exploiters of child labour and representatives of Save the Children had been conducted. The report had introduced the concept of children's rights and explained the dangers of child labour. It had helped parents to understand that education was a more effective means of escaping poverty than sending children to work for a pittance. The programme served as an intermediary between agencies and aid recipients and the format made it possible to reach an often illiterate community.

**Ms. Pean-Mevs** (Haiti) said that in the wake of the devastating earthquake of 12 January 2010, her Government had launched a humanitarian action plan in conjunction with the humanitarian agencies operating in the country. It had also updated national contingency plans to build resilience to disasters. Through the national system for risk and disaster management, public awareness was being raised about the need to follow safety instructions and design family emergency plans for the hurricane season. She urged humanitarian organizations to cooperate more closely with States on capacity-building.

**Ms. Macrae** (United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland) said her Government was scaling up its investment in humanitarian innovation, which it saw as a core element of its humanitarian efforts. Citing the example of the Plumpy'Nut campaign against acute malnutrition, she said that innovation was not just about technology but also about rethinking business practices. Innovation required a tolerance of failure as well as an openness to challenges to the current humanitarian business model. Humanitarian actors needed to improve the way that they filtered ideas and to act more quickly on the ideas that they retained. When testing new ideas, donors and agencies should factor in the needs and situation of beneficiaries, document the lessons learned, and disseminate findings swiftly. She also recommended that innovation efforts should be focused on a few key areas, such as energy, data use and beneficiary engagement.

**Ms. Gebremedhin** (Observer for Finland) asked how the international community could promote innovation more systematically and how the panellists saw the role of donor countries in that regard. She also asked how the Inter-Agency Standing Committee Working Group approached the issue of innovation. Lastly, she said that she would be glad to know how the American Red Cross screened and verified the data that it collected from social media.

**Mr. Ouedraogo** (Burkina Faso) said that mobile phones were a good tool for reaching remote communities, but stressed that that was only feasible if mobile networks were reliable. He expressed concern that there was a technology imbalance between humanitarian agencies and national entities responsible for humanitarian action on the ground. He suggested that a database of innovative ideas and tools could be established to enable developing countries to select those ideas that best matched their specific needs and budgets. He urged the international community to help developing countries to obtain a minimum technology package in order to be on more even footing with each other and with donor countries.

**Ms. Harman** (Director of Information Management and Situational Awareness, American Red Cross) said that her organization used software that had a keyword search function for pinpointing actionable information. A team of three people who were experienced in sifting through vast amounts of data and using social media combed through the information as an additional failsafe. The organization also replied to tweets in order to engage the original tweeter and verify the information. She said that it would be difficult for the organization to share its digital information without making drastic changes to its operating procedures.

**Ms. Rasmusson** (Assistant Executive Director for Partnership and Governance Services of the World Food Programme (WFP)) said that donors should be encouraged to invest in innovation funds that were flexible enough to allow for the vagaries of testing new ideas. The private sector should be mobilized as a driver of innovation. She suggested that the Inter-Agency Standing Committee Working Group could host a platform to help inter-agency partners to find innovative solutions to humanitarian problems.

**Mr. Osman** (Managing Director of Star-FM, Kenya) said that public-private partnerships were crucial for the long-term financial sustainability of humanitarian interventions. Humanitarian agencies should consider establishing departments of innovation, with an innovation officer responsible for liaising with private and public partners. Cooperation between donors and deliverers of humanitarian aid and speedy communication between headquarters and field offices were also vital for the success of humanitarian operations.

**Ms. Eliasson** (Sweden) said that innovation was no longer an option, but a necessity. Beyond innovative technologies, new products, approaches and partnerships were needed. Action must be taken to empower and improve communication with beneficiaries. Data generated by mobile phone users and social media should be harnessed to monitor trends in vulnerable populations and adapt responses accordingly.

**Ms. Berg** (Observer for Norway) said that the private sector was playing a growing role in humanitarian innovation. While some off-the-shelf products could certainly be adapted for purpose, humanitarian agencies also needed to initiate their own innovation projects, in partnership with businesses. She asked the panellists how innovation could be financed and how humanitarian financing could be more flexible to facilitate cooperation with the business sector. She wished to know how humanitarian agencies dealt with the risk of failure when they were using innovative tools.

**Mr. Andanje** (Observer for Kenya) said that Star FM was a model of how innovation could serve refugees and society at large. He asked whether the issue of voluntary repatriation of Somali refugees from Kenya had been discussed with the refugees themselves and, if so, what their response had been.

**Ms. De Clarens** (Observer for the European Union) said that innovation was essential for better humanitarian service delivery in a fast-changing global environment. Although innovative processes had proved useful in operations to deliver food assistance and shelter, for example, there seemed to be resistance against a global roll-out of such processes. She wished to know how that resistance could be overcome.

**Ms. Hamaguchi** (Japan) said that innovation and cross-sectoral cooperation were equally important. During the 2011 earthquake in Japan, relief operations had been hampered because not all actors had been involved from the start. In the light of that experience, Japan was building a robust distribution system with the participation of all stakeholders. Preparedness was vital to maximizing the usefulness of new techniques.

**Mr. Bessler** (Observer for Switzerland) said that he wondered who "owned" innovation. He would be glad to know which way the Inter-Agency Standing Committee

Working Group was driving innovation and whether it reached out to the private sector. He also wanted to know who would be responsible for setting standards and controlling the quality of innovative mechanisms and processes.

**Mr. Piantini** (Dominican Republic) said that his country was increasingly affected by extreme weather events linked to climate change. Using innovative technologies, local communities had invoked their right to protection. That, in turn, had helped to improve the country's emergency response and preparedness capacity. The result had been a significant fall in the number of disaster-related deaths.

**Mr. Kent** (United States of America) asked whether the existence of innovative information tools had changed decision-making processes during emergency response operations. He also wished to know how humanitarian agencies ascertained the veracity of information provided by social and other media, especially in complex emergencies.

**Mr. Corliss** (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)) said that innovation in the field had always existed, often without the knowledge of headquarters, as innovators feared being stifled by bureaucracy. He was pleased with the current trends regarding the creation of an enabling environment for innovation. Within UNHCR, the focus was on highlighting existing innovations in the organization, connecting innovators at the field level and providing access to innovation expertise outside UNHCR. One example of innovative cooperation was the development of a new shelter prototype, the "Refugee Housing Unit". The prototype had been created in cooperation with the Swedish foundation SVID (Stiftelsen Svensk Industridesign) and the IKEA Foundation and would be field-tested in Ethiopia shortly.

**Mr. Castro Grande** (International Telecommunications Union (ITU)) said that wide broadband coverage was crucial for bridging the North-South and urban-rural digital divide. New technology must be accessible and affordable and States should include national broadband plans in their development and humanitarian programming.

**Mr. Osman** (Managing Director of Star FM, Kenya) said that the Kenyan Government had decided to repatriate Somali refugees in the light of the deteriorating security situation at the Dadaab refugee camp. The decision was understandable, but the refugees were not ready to leave. Most refugees came from southern Somalia, where the security situation remained fragile. Some humanitarian agencies had appealed to the Kenyan Government to reverse its decision. Many refugees had lived in Dadaab for two decades and a lot of them had been born there but had not been integrated into Kenyan society. Youth unemployment was a major factor in insecurity in the camp, as access to further education or employment outside the camp was denied. Many young people saw no other option than to get involved in gang activities or to join the militia. UNHCR had set up an information, communication and technology hub in each camp to provide refugees with access to the Internet.

**Ms. Rasmusson** (Assistant Executive Director for Partnership and Governance Services, World Food Programme (WFP)) said that innovation processes must be co-owned. The Inter-Agency Standing Committee Working Group could play a role in innovation and information sharing, but the main drivers of innovation were humanitarian field staff. Communication between the field and headquarters must be improved. Information sharing, including feedback mechanisms for beneficiaries, had had a significant impact on decision-making in operations and programming.

Securing private sector financing did not necessarily involve going to ask for money. It meant identifying common objectives and opportunities and building creative partnerships. The members of the humanitarian community should not compete over ideas, but share and cooperate with one another for the sake of beneficiaries.

**Ms. Harman** (Director of Information Management and Situational Awareness, American Red Cross) said that the long-standing cooperation between the American Red Cross and the Dell corporation underscored the importance of humanitarian actors' capacity to engage with the private sector. Innovation could only happen through cooperation and the tearing down of institutional walls. Identifying appropriate ways to integrate social media and new technology into established disaster response processes remained a challenge. Information provided through social media had been used to adapt service delivery responses during the 2010 earthquake in Haiti and Hurricane Sandy. The earthquake in Haiti had been a powerful reminder of the importance of modern communication tools. It had led to a policy shift within her organization towards greater empowerment for local communities, with the American Red Cross working as a facilitator.

**Ms. Amos** (Moderator), speaking in her capacity as Under-Secretary-General and Emergency Relief Coordinator of the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), said that the existence of a gap between relief and sustainable development had been widely recognized. It made resilience-building and joint action by humanitarian and development agencies all the more necessary. OCHA had published a document entitled: *Humanitarianism in the Network Age*, which identified information as a basic need and highlighted the need to build capacity in that area. OCHA brought together different actors to facilitate the shift towards an innovation enabling environment. It had developed a partnership with the World Economic Forum, which was at the forefront of innovation.

**The President**, summing up, said that a raft of innovative tools and measures could be used to help prevent and manage disasters. The issues of affordability, screening of information and financing would require further consideration. The emerging innovation paradigm would be co-owned by diverse actors and entities, which would use different portals and platforms and work to achieve synergies.

**Ms. Amos** (Moderator), presenting the outcome of the poll on humanitarian innovation for improved response, said that 22 per cent of participants had indicated that innovation was most useful for improving communication; 24 per cent thought that it was most useful for utilizing new technology developments; 27 per cent thought that it was particularly helpful for developing new tools and services; and another 27 per cent thought that it created a culture where humanitarian organizations were able to identify problems more accurately.

*The meeting rose at 12.50 p.m.*